

NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY

OF THE HMONG LANGUAGE

THE HMONG HAVE an oft-told tale about the destruction of an ancient written form of their language. They say that once they had a great book, filled with knowledge about life and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. But this book was eaten by hungry cows and rats (Cooper et al., 1991:42), and their written language was lost. Other stories suggest that books were eaten by Hmong themselves when hungry (Tapp 1989b:122; Geddes 1976:20 [quoted in Tapp]). For many centuries Hmong knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the next in tales told to children around the fire at night, or in the teachings of elders, shamans, and old wives.

Today there are several written forms of Hmong using different scripts (Lemoine 1972a; Tapp 1989b:127–30). Around the end of the nineteenth century, missionary linguists created a written language so that Hmong culture could be preserved and prayers and Bible stories written down. In 1953 Linwood Barney, William Smalley, and Yves Bertrais—three missionaries in Laos—devised a way to use the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) to render a written form of the Hmong language that did not need special accents, symbols, or diacritics. Their method, which has become the standard for linguists in the West, is used in this book. Hmong has many dialects;

I have used White Hmong, that spoken by the people I lived with during my fieldwork.

The Hmong language is tonal and generally monosyllabic. For a non-musical person the tones are very difficult to hear until one has listened extensively. (For example, the word for “dog” [*dev*] is difficult to discern from the word for “water” [*dej*]. For quite some time I was asking for a drink of dog because my tonal value was off.) Most words end with a vowel and then a consonant; the consonant signals the tone. The seven consonants and their tonal values are

<i>b</i>	high level
<i>j</i>	high falling
<i>v</i>	rising
<i>g</i>	breathy
<i>m</i>	glottal constriction/low
<i>s</i>	low
<i>d</i>	similar to an <i>m</i> tone but seldom used

The lack of a consonant at the end of a word signals a mid-tone. A double vowel, such as the *ee* in *neeb* (spirit) or the *oo* in *Hmoob* (Hmong), signals nasalization of the vowel and an ending of *ng*.

Hmong living in the West have changed the spelling of their names—and the word “Hmong,” which is more precisely “Hmoob”—to make them easier for English-speaking people to read and pronounce. For example, the clan name Thoj has become Thao, Vaj has become Vang, Hawj has become Her, and Muas has become Moua. In this book I have kept the original Hmong spelling except in people’s names, which follow the personal preference of the bearers of those names, and the word “Hmong.”